

## Does Prayer Work?

[Acts 12:1-17](#)

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My guess is that we all think prayer is important. Real important. So why do we have such a hard time doing it?

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As we have continued through this series of sermons on the books of Acts, we have watched the gospel move from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. Next week we will begin to look at the missionary journeys that took the gospel throughout the Roman empire. It looks like nothing can stop the spread of this news about Jesus Christ. But periodically, in between the chapters of triumph and victory for the gospel, Luke weaves in the hard chapters that describe the church's dark nights. These are the nights when they thought they may lose everything. Nights like the one described in the twelfth chapter. Most every life has these dark nights. They are the ones that teach us the most about prayer.

Our text today begins by telling us, "King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church." This Herod was the grandson of Herod the Great, who killed the children of Bethlehem. And he was the nephew of Herod Antipas, who tried Jesus. Like all the Herods before him, he was ruthless for power. When he realized that the Jewish religious leaders were becoming anxious about the tremendous growth of the church in Jerusalem, Herod arrested and then killed James, the brother of John. Seeing that this made his popularity poll rise, he arrested Peter also, with plans to kill him as well.

We are told that on the night Peter was arrested and thrown into jail, "The church prayed fervently for him." But don't you think the church also prayed fervently for James, who was killed anyway? So what was the church expecting with their fervent prayers for Peter? Had they learned to lower their expectations? Were they just saying, "O Lord, make him courageous in his hour of death. Comfort him in his chains."? Or did they still have the guts to pray, "Dear God, please get Peter out of there!"

What about you? How do you pray on your dark nights? A loved one becomes sick. Very sick. Do you pray for healing? But there have been other requests that have been denied. What if she dies anyway, in spite of your prayers for healing? What does that say about your prayers, or about God's power to heal? Are you tempted to lower your expectations through prayer so as to get God off the hook, just in case?

Well, God doesn't need you to be his spin doctor. And you dare not use prayer to lower your expectations or to learn how to play it safe. When it comes to prayer there is no playing it safe. There is just you, and how it is, and the struggle to understand God. The most definitive words Jesus ever spoke on prayer were, "Ask. Seek. Knock." He didn't tell us to pray for a sense of detachment or for the ability not to care what happens. He taught us to pray very specifically, with lots of imperatives, like, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done." So all our faith is on the line every time we pray.

We have so many questions about prayer, but what we most want to know is does prayer work? Does it really change things? The answer to that question is a resounding, "Yes." But mostly what prayer changes is the person who is praying. That is because in prayer, we enter into the presence of God. And we cannot do that without being changed. Dramatically. When we pray for others, we place them into the presence of God, in which they are also confronted with the possibility of change. You see, it isn't that prayer is powerful. But God is powerful, and to pray is to give ourselves over to this enormous power.

Now, that does not mean that we will always receive what we ask for in prayer. Our requests are never more than the invitation to enter into God's presence. There we discover that we receive not necessarily what we want, but God himself. Sometimes, no matter how hard we pray, the loved one dies. Sometimes, even after you pray for your kids, they may still grow up to break your heart. Sometimes, good apostles like James were left in prison to be executed, in spite of the fervent prayers of the church. But to place ourselves, others, even Herod, back into God's hands is to say, "God, we know your ways are not our ways. So what we want is to understand your will. Help us to see it!" We are told that, "If we ask anything, according to his will, he hears us." (1 John 5:14). The operative words there, of course, are "according to his will." And how are you going to know what that will is, unless you enter into prayer and stand in the presence of God.

It is the dark nights that will help you learn how to pray, and thus struggle for the will of God. Peter had been through enough of these dark nights already, that it changed his perspective on how to survive one. This was not Peter's first trip to prison. It was his third. The last time, when he escaped from prison, he came back to tell the authorities that God is sovereign, and that his own life was simply a witness to the will of God.

Maybe that is why Peter isn't too worried during this third imprisonment. Look at how the scene is described. Peter is bound with two chains. He is sleeping between two soldiers. There are two more soldiers posted outside his cell. He knows that Herod killed James, and that he intends on doing the same thing to him. And yet, when an angel of God appeared in the cell, even though a light also suddenly appeared, the angel can't get Peter to wake up. He has to nudge him and say, "Get up!" Clearly, this is not a man who is worried about dying. Maybe that is because Peter had found the peace of surrender to the will of a loving God, whatever happened. Aren't we all looking for that kind of peace? It is only prayer that will get you there.

We are told that Peter then followed the angel past the guards through the prison gates, not knowing if this was real or if he was seeing a vision. But when he got outside, "he came to himself" and realized he had been rescued. That is usually how God's deliverance works. We cannot see it while it is happening. It is later that we come to ourselves and give thanks. Along the way it seemed like just one more treatment of chemotherapy ... or just one more hard conversation with the spouse ... or just one more

lonely drive home after a hard day at the office. But God was at work in that. His sovereign will was unfolding. In time, if we pray, we will come to ourselves with the great "Aha!" We will give thanks for what we did not see, because we were not looking for the angels. So one of the benefits of prayer is that our hearts are made grateful. Thus, gratitude is the greatest measure of our spirituality.

Maybe you are ready to live with more gratitude. And you know that you should pray. You should make prayer a priority. You should begin your day with prayer. But all of those shoulds do not have the power to overcome the greatest obstacle to prayer -- your busyness. There is just so much to do. The day begins early, ends late, and is jammed-packed in the middle. I understand that objection. I face it every day in my own life. But in the words of Eugene Peterson, busyness is a lazy thing. It avoids the hardest work of all, which is prayer.

The reason prayer is hard work is because, like any relationship, it requires time spent with God. And like any mature relationship, not all the communication is exciting. Frankly, sometimes prayer can be dull or even boring. But that doesn't mean you are not doing it well. We do not pray to see angels light up our cells. We pray to attend to the presence of God in our lives, even in the ordinary times when that presence does not excite us. Also like any other mature relationship, we need to learn how not only to talk to God, but also to listen. This was the lesson the young church had to learn - how to listen to God in their prayers.

As soon as Peter figured out what God was doing, the first thing he does is run over to the house where the church is praying fervently for him. He gets to the front gate, and starts knocking. A servant girl, named Rhoda, comes to the door to quiet down this guy who is disturbing the prayer meeting. She is astonished to see Peter there. So astonished, that she leaves him outside the door and runs inside to tell everyone, "Hey, Peter, the one you are praying for, is at the door!" They say to her, "You're out of your mind." Or in the more literal translation, "You've lost touch with reality." Isn't that amazing? Rhoda interrupts their prayers to say, "Peter's outside." And all they tell her is, "Be quiet, so we can get back to praying for his release." They are so busy knocking on heaven's door, they cannot hear God knocking on their door.

Prayer is not so much your many words before God, as it is your communion with God. It is a way of taking a long, careful look at what is real and true. If prayer has as its goal to lead you into God's truth, you don't need so many words. In fact, usually when we use a lot of words, it's because we are trying to avoid the truth.

There is no greater truth than the presence of God in your life. He is knocking, knocking, knocking at the door, that you open to see all the glorious things he has been doing. Wouldn't it be the most tragic of ironies if the thing that kept us from seeing God's deliverance was that we did not believe our own prayers?

You have told us, O Savior, that we have not because we ask not. You have told us that you are more willing to give than we are to receive, and that you long to provide the desire of our hearts. Give us the courage then to stand in your presence and listen to your still small voice, that there we may learn what to ask, and at last discover that it is you who are the desire of our hearts. Amen.